

Honor WWI vets before they're all gone

BY JEFFREY S. REZNICK

WASHINGTON // Americans today are rightly concerned about the health and safety of our troops engaged in the global war on terrorism. We are equally interested in preserving the legacy of the "greatest generation" of World War II.

But as we focus on our soldiers of today and yesteryear, we have largely forgotten our veterans of the "war to end all wars," World War I. They, too, deserve special recognition this Veterans Day because fewer than 40 survive; the death of this entire generation is imminent.

Nearly 4.5 million men wore the American uniform in the "Great War." Now, 87 years after the end of the conflict, the average age of our World War I veterans is 105. With each passing spring and summer, we lose several more.

Our last veteran of the 1914-1918 war probably will die within the next year or so. When he does, his name will be added to a list of "last veterans" kept by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The most recent update to this list occurred in 1992, when Nathan Cook died at 106. He was the last Spanish-American War veteran.

The dwindling ranks of our World War I veterans mark a poignant moment in our nation's history. When this generation is gone, our direct and living connections to the Great War will be gone. Only artifacts and memorials of the era will remain.

The collections of our museums and libraries present a unique memorial to the war and its veterans. Photographs, films, anatomical specimens and medical equipment document the surgical achievements of the 1917-1918 American Expeditionary Forces. Diaries, letters, memoirs and poetry reflect the broader social history of our soldiers "over there" and our nation at home during this watershed era.

Equally important is recognition of our traditional memorials to the World War I veterans, their war and their experiences. Visitors to Washington's Mall should see the World War I memorial there. Commemorating



U.S. soldiers celebrate as terms of the armistice ending World War I are read in Remoiville, France, in November 1918. Fewer than 40 veterans of the "the war to end all wars" survive today, and their average age is 105.

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the military service of Washington residents, with its fading marble inscriptions, the site is hidden in a grove of magnolia trees just a few hundred yards from the new National World War II Memorial.

World War I is the first chapter in the history of the modern era. That generation was the first war generation to witness fully mechanized battle. It came of age in the face of machine guns, tanks and gas that killed hundreds of thousands and disabled, disfigured and traumatized hundreds of thousands more. They witnessed the horrors of war, and some lived to see another world war and wars beyond that.

The World War I generation created ideas and language that are still in use. When we describe the ongoing political battles over abortion rights as "trench warfare," the terrain after a natural disaster as "no

man's land" and the victims of hurricanes as "shell-shocked," we are using descriptions that have their origin in the generation that is about to leave us.

That generation also witnessed a public health tragedy. The 1918 flu outbreak was the worst pandemic in American history, killing more than 675,000 Americans and tens of millions worldwide. This event and the generation that confronted it are in the headlines today as we brace ourselves for another possible pandemic, perhaps one on the scale of 1918. We were unprepared then to deal with such a crisis, and we are unprepared now.

The World War I generation witnessed medical innovation. On the battlefield, wounded American soldiers benefited from doctors adopting the World War I French system of triage, the sorting of casualties according to the severity of wounds and their need for surgical treatment.

At Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and other hospitals around the country, soldiers disabled in battle received artificial limbs and braces as part of physical reconstruction programs that involved education classes and rehabilitation workshops.

Since World War I, triage has become a standard practice in emergency medicine. Cultivated in war, the specialized fields of orthotics, prosthetics, physical therapy and occupational therapy have become essential to the rehabilitation of soldiers and civilians alike.

Veterans Day is the enduring legacy of World War I and its generation. It originated as Armistice Day on Nov. 11, 1918, to commemorate the end of the conflict. As we observe the holiday this year, and before we know the name of our last World War I veteran, we should honor the very few who survive.

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